

Building Blocks of Faith: Communion  
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Communion has always been a central part of worship for our Disciples of Christ denomination, despite how bizarre it must appear to outsiders. Think about it: we talk about a loaf of bread being someone's body and a thimble of grape juice being someone's blood, and then we eat and drink them! Gross! And we call it the Lord's Supper, but who eats a supper that small? What kind of new diet is that? Besides, who eats supper at 8:30/10:30 in the morning?

Nevertheless, for those familiar with communion, it has become a valued part of our worship. In fact, it's one of the things that sets us apart as a denomination. Someone once said that a Disciples of Christ worship without communion is like taking a shower without turning on the water. Because we do it weekly – communion, not taking a shower -- it's easy to take it for granted or for its meaning to be lost in the routine. So this morning, I want to reexamine the elements of communion, what it says to us about Jesus, and what it means for our lives.

Eating is something most of us love to do, so a lot more than others. But eating is far more than just a biological necessity; there's a whole context that goes with a meal and gives it its importance. A meal can be an important time of rest, refreshment, and relationship-building. The Bible recognizes that some of the most important moments in our lives revolve around a meal.

The theology behind the sharing a meal dates back to the time of ancient Israel. Having a meal together formed a bond; sharing your food with someone was a way to seal a covenant between you. For example, when God was about to rescue the enslaved Israelites from Egypt, God commanded them to share a meal on the night before their liberation. That became known as the Passover meal, and has been celebrated ever since as a reminder of God's delivering act.

The New Testament is full of the sharing of meals. The feeding of the 5,000; the meal in Emmaus with the risen Christ; the sharing of the fish on the beach at the end of John's gospel – all of these are significant events in the gospels which have as a central element the sharing of a meal. What did Jesus do on the last night of his life? He shared a meal with his closest friends in the Upper Room. Acts 2:42 tells us that one of the main functions of worship for the early church was the breaking of bread together.

Our Disciples of Christ founders sought to reclaim that early view of the importance of communion in their worship. Not only did they believe in the weekly observance of communion, but they also believed that everyone who made their confession of faith through baptism was welcome at the table, regardless of their denominational affiliation. This idea of communion being open to everyone flew in the face of many denominations, and was one of the reasons Thomas Campbell left the Presbyterians to start his own movement, which would eventually grow into the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Sharing a meal is important and has biblical precedence, but why weekly? We're one of the few Protestant denominations that take communion on a weekly basis. One reason for weekly communion deals with the limitations of our words in our worship. No word we speak in this service can fully capture what's going on here, as God's love and

forgiveness are poured out for us. Without communion, the whole responsibility of interpreting and applying God's Word falls on the sermon, and every sermon will fall short of that goal. But with communion as a part of every worship, that weight is lifted from the sermon. Regardless of how well or poorly the sermon proclaims the Good News, the preacher knows that at another point in the service, God's message will be communicated, not through our words, but through the tangible action of eating and drinking. In this sense, the words of preaching and the act of communion work together to help make God's word real each Sunday.

Another reason for celebrating communion weekly is that, frankly, we need the reminder. We are a blessed and forgiven group of people, but it's so easy to forget that in the midst of the chaos and craziness of life. So communion is about helping us remember. We know that regardless of what happens for six days, regardless of the angry words, the poor decisions, the shortfalls, on that seventh day we will gather once again around a table to hear God's merciful word and taste God's gracious goodness. Communion doesn't magically wipe away our problems; it is simply a reminder that God is always with us. Communion's reliable presence in our worship mirrors God's reliable presence in our lives. In communion we renew our covenant with God each week; God promises to be with us, and we promise to honor God with our lives in the week ahead.

So weekly communion helps proclaim God's word to us and reminds us of God's presence with us. But what actually happens when we hold that bread and cup in our hands?

The beliefs surrounding this are widespread and have been the source of major religious controversies down through the centuries. On one end of the spectrum is what is called transubstantiation. Believers of this, such as Roman Catholics, claim that during communion, the bread and the cup are supernaturally transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. In the book Angela's Ashes, author Frank McCourt tells about celebrating his first communion in the Catholic church in Ireland. Shortly after church, he became ill and vomited outside his grandmother's house later that day. She was horrified and exclaimed, "Now you've gone and thrown up our Savior all over my backyard!"

On the other end of the spectrum from transubstantiation is the belief that communion is a memorial service, the kind of service you would have for a deceased person. In this way of thinking, Christ is not actively present in the meal; he is merely recalled and remembered. Many churches that observe communion infrequently take this vantage point.

As Disciples, we fall in the middle of the two extremes. We believe that the bread and the cup remain the bread and the cup during communion, but that in the act of communion, in the act of sharing a meal together, Christ becomes fully present with us. In a sense, not only do the bread and the cup symbolically represent Christ to us, the bread and the cup re-present Christ to us, and we are once again reconnected to our Savior by actively remembering his sacrifice for us. Communion feeds our faith in several important ways.

First, as I mentioned, it helps us actively remember the gift of Jesus Christ. The idea of actively remembering is built into our celebration; we say that when we eat this bread and drink this cup, we do so in remembrance of Christ. Through communion, we remember that his body was broken and his blood was shed, not randomly or unnecessarily, but for each of us.

I first fully realized this during a chapel service at my seminary. For communion, we all came forward, tore off a piece of bread and dipped it into the cup, a method known as intinction. As I did so, the person holding the bread looked me in the eye and said, “Kory, this is Jesus’ body, broken for you.” The person holding the cup said, “Kory, this is Jesus’ blood, shed for you.” That experience made me realize the intimate nature of communion. That body, that blood, it was broken and shed – for me. When you take that bread and put the cup to your lips, remember: his body was broken for you. His blood was shed for you.

Communion not only helps us remember, but through it would look forward to the future, as well. We not only remember the sacrifice of Christ, but the promise of his return. We not only remember Jesus’ death, but also the new life he received and offers us. The thimble-sized cup and pinch of bread foreshadow for us the great banquet feast of which we’ll partake in God’s heavenly kingdom.

So, in the act of weekly communion, we bring both past and future into the present as we celebrate God’s love for us and Jesus’ presence with us. And we do so not passively, but actively. We participate in the meal. Would communion be as meaningful, as spiritually nourishing, if all we did was look at the bread and cup, not partake of it? There’s something about actually touching the bread and tasting the cup that is sensual, that makes the experience more real for us. The loaf and the cup are symbols that awaken our senses to the presence of the Lord. We become participants in the celebration, guests at the feast. And we’re reminded how simple, daily, taken-for-granted acts like eating and drinking around a table with loved ones are more than just quick meals – they can become sacred times of sharing our food and our lives together.

As a church, we share this meal together, acknowledging the worth of everyone present, and indeed, everyone around the world who shares with us in this meal. On this World Communion Sunday, when we come to the table, we do so with believers in Congo, who use Kool-aid and rice cakes, and with believers in Fiji who use Roti bread and pineapple juice. We restate our unity with Christians in China, in Chile, and in the Middle East. At the table, we make the bold statement that despite our human differences, we are one body woven together by our faith in Christ, and that bond of love is stronger than any human divisions. May the bread and the cup we take today help us remember the One who created us, the One who died for us, and the One who walks beside us, and may they nourish our spirits to live a life devoted to God.